EVEN AT THE UNLIKELIEST OF MOMENTS

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“Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.”
(Luke 24:31)

One of the responsibilities of a minister is to be with families as they deal with the death of one of their own — it is also a precious privilege. The days following the death of a dear one are difficult. There are a multitude of details to attend to, people to call, and relatives to pick up at the airport. It is exhausting both physically and emotionally; we don’t sleep much and don’t have much of an appetite, and somehow we get through it with the help and support of one another and our dear friends. Then comes the funeral or memorial service which is emotionally draining and then the

burial or committal during which the reality and finality of what has happened sets in. And then, in communities all across the country, many families gather themselves around a dinner table…in the home of one of their own, or the home of the one who died, the church hall, or the club, or a restaurant. If you have experienced it, and I am sure most of you have, you know the slow process of healing actually begins when a family or a group of friends drinks and eats together, and the conversation turns to memory… “Remember how she use to…Remember the time he…Remember how she’d laugh when…”

It is one of the great privileges of ministry to witness the healing that begins to happen in that way — and I think about those experiences every

time I hear the story of the two friends of Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus had died. There was no doubt about that. And with him had died the hope and faith of his disciples. The finality of his crucifixion had brought to a disastrous end to their group sense that what he said was true, that he was the truth, that in his presence they were somehow in the presence of God. All of that ended when he died on a Friday afternoon.

A few of the women had returned from the place he had been buried, claiming that the tomb was empty and a few of the twelve had claimed to see him. But for the most part his friends were still experiencing the shock of what had happened and

the grief that their friend was gone. And so two of them went for a walk.

What is so remarkable about this story is how ordinary it is. The two of them could be any of us. The road to Emmaus could be any road. Emmaus could be the common way you and I cope with loss and grief.

As they walk, talking about what had happened, the traumatic events of his betrayal and arrest, the horror of his crucifixion and his death, alone, between two thieves. Near the city dumps, they are joined by a stranger. Isn’t it odd that they didn’t recognize him? They continue to talk about what happened, explaining it to him. “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn’t know about it?”

they ask him. And then, as the sun begins to set, they extend hospitality to the stranger, inviting him to share their evening meal and spend the night with them. It is when he break the bread for them — in a way reminiscent of the time he fed the multitude, powerfully reminiscent of the way he had broken bread and shared it with his disciples on the night he was arrested…as he broke the bread, they recognized him. It was Jesus.

I love that story. I love the way they tell him the story accurately but without much passion. It’s as if they can’t believe what their friends are telling them. They have information, but it hasn’t made any difference to them. It reminds me of the story of two men who took a ride in a hot air balloon. They ascended to the appropriate altitude and

caught the wind currents, the men were looking for and were enjoying the wonderful view and loving the whole experience when suddenly the wind shifted and a thick band of fog engulfed them. As they sailed on through the fog they lost their bearings and became increasingly concerned and confused about their location. As they sailed through the fog: they were at about 100ft from the ground and fortunately, down below them in a field was a man. “Hello, down there,” they yelled. Where are we?” “Why,” the man called back to them, “You are in a hot air balloon.” With that the fog closed in again. “Isn’t it our luck?” one said to the other. “We meet one person who could tell us where we are and he turns out to be a lawyer…” “How do you know he’s a lawyer?” the other one asked. “Well,” the first speaker explained, “The

information he gave us was entirely accurate. It just wasn't very useful."

The two friends of Jesus know the story. They had the objective facts. It just hadn't begun to matter much. There was no passion yet, no commitment, no courage, no brave devotion.

I love the story because I think that's the way a lot of us relate to Christian faith in general and Easter even in particular. Oh, we know the facts but the reality has not yet changed the way we think and live. We know the words of Christianity but not the power and reality of it.

Craig Barnes, pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington — and some of you will

remember, a former staff member of this church while he was finishing his Ph.D. Craig wrote a fine Easter essay for the Christian Century. Craig wrote:

> “The question that Easter asks of us is not ‘Do we believe in the doctrine of resurrection?’ Frankly that’s not particularly hard…What the Gospels ask is not, ‘Do you believe?’ but ‘Have you encountered a risen Christ?’”

And then Craig wrote:

> “No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen.”

That’s autobiographical, by the way. He didn’t say it in the essay, but those of us who know him recognized it. Craig knows about the “dark place where hope cannot be seen.” Not long after he was called to National Presbyterian Church, a large and important congregation in the nation’s capital, he was stricken with cancer and everybody who knew him and cared about him was worried about him, and his wife and daughter and his very promising ministry. But with great courage, Craig underwent radical medical therapy and the cancer went into remission. Craig is doing just fine and expects to continue in good health. But he knows about the “dark place where hope is difficult to see.” And when he talks about the life changing, life giving reality of the risen Christ, it has the ring of truth

about it. [The Christian Century, March 13-20, 2002, *Savior at Large*]

I love the fact that in this story, the risen Christ comes to two men in the midst of an ordinary, very human activity — taking a walk, dealing with a terrible loss. They weren't looking for him. They didn't even recognize him. Faith, this story suggests, does not come as a result of our quest. Faith is not a product of studying theology, memorizing scriptures, reciting creed. Faith is not even produced much by church going. Faith is a gift. Fiat is what happens when, by God's good grace, a risen Christ confronts us in the middle of life, and an ordinary experience becomes a sacred experience, an ordinary moment becomes a holy moment.

The scholars tell us that if Jesus' contemporaries had any concept of resurrection it was in a life after death. But this experience happened in the here and now. They weren't in heaven. They were walking on a familiar road. The moment of recognition happened not in a mystical trance, a vision, an ecstatic experience; it was the common, everyday act of eating the evening meal together.

The two must make a decision now: to trust the new reality, this amazing possibility; or to go on continuing what they were doing, to continue their journey. They decide to trust. They turn around and go back to Jerusalem and although they are never heard from again, you know they join the twelve and tell them, as best they can, about what

happened to them and they set out to live their lives — their brand new lives in light of this new reality. They decide.

Barbara Brown Taylor says the resurrection of Jesus Christ permanently rearranges our understanding of reality. Before they — we — try to squeeze some definition of what we are told happened on Easter morning into our understanding of the world and how things work in the world. Afterward, it's the other way around. How we understand the world has to fit into the reality of a love more powerful than death, or a love that conquers all, even the power of death itself. And that's a decision about how we will live our lives.

Thinking of them, Taylor writes:

> “Deciding to trust the contours of this new reality more than they trust their accustomed sense of things, the friends themselves are changes. They stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. They sell all their stuff and put all their money in a common pot so that no one is in need. They lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they become known for their glad and generous hearts. In this way, their way of life becomes contagious.” [Journals for Preachers, Easter 2000]

What they do, those tow, is remember to extend hospitality to the stranger. After looking at this

story from every conceivable angle, I conclude that it’s the only thing they do to contribute to this resurrection experience And I conclude that extending hospitality — is perhaps what Jesus Christ wants most from his church. And that he promises to be present and alive in his church as it remembers to extend hospitality in his name — to those who need it most, to the stranger — whoever that may be and who he once was. I conclude that he cares a lot more about welcoming the unwelcome than he does about excluding the unacceptable. I conclude that he cares a lot more about who is welcomed than about who is shut out.

So far as I can see, inviting his to stay for dinner is the only thing these two did right — and it was enough. As so, I conclude, that while the grandeur

of this worship home is surely an important part of who this church is, an equally important and possibly more important part will happen later this afternoon. As the sun is setting and a hundred or so hungry, homeless men and women start to gather for the Sunday Night Supper.

I love this story because it is about the healing of grief, and the reappearance of hope in the middle of devastating loss. Frederick Buechner, who will preach two weeks from today, has written a fine new book about four writers who have influenced him and how they dealt with darkness and loss in their lives: the Jesuit poet Gerald Manly Hopkins, C.K. Chesterton, Mark Twain, and William Shakespeare — particularly King Lear — about which Buechner has written all his life. It's entitled

Speak What You Feel and it's a good read and at the end Buechner writes briefly about his own losses…it's a poignant conclusion:

> "Like anyone else pushing seventy-five, the stage I hold faith on is littered with the dead, including my own brother and oldest friend…In addition to this, my body is no longer altogether the one I depended on all these years…There is sadness too in thinking how much more I might have done with my life…" Buechner has given much to many people so it is particularly poignant when he writes: "I wish such faith as I have had been brighter and gladder. I wish I had done more with it. I wish I had been braver and bolder…" [p. 160]

> What he learned, he says, from his four writers is: “Take heart, even at the unlikeliest moments.”

There was, I suppose, no more unlikely moment than that humble meal, at the end of the day, on the road to Emmaus. And you and I are invited to expect God to find us — not just in church, but in the ordinary, unlikely moments and experiences that make up our lives.

I began by suggesting that sacred moments happen as families live through the worst of their grief together. By that I mean that the risen Christ, the one who overcame and overcomes the power of death is in those moments.

I read another book recently, a wonderful one, called *Open Secrets*. It's a book by Richard Lischen, professor at Duke Divinity School, about his experiences as a newly ordained Lutheran pastor in Southern Illinois. It's also about a funeral, Bust Toland's funeral. Buster was mechanic at the local garage. His wife, Beulah, drank too much and was high on drugs most of the time. They argued loudly and profanely and bitterly and in the middle of this huge shouting match when he came home from lunch — there was no lunch — Buster dropped dead. "Dead before he hit the floor," Beulah said, at least a hundred times to anyone who would listen.

Buster was a rascal and his death made the whole community feel apprehensive and worried about his utterly dysfunctional family.

Lischen helped Beulah through the funeral plans, negotiations with the funeral director, all of which was very difficult. Beulah was insisting on the most expensive casket and arrangements because she "owed it to Buster" she said. The idealistic young minister managed to alienate the local funeral director and infuriate his Board of Trustees in the process. Finally the day for the funeral arrived, complete with the open casket in the narthex of the church. The service was a disaster. Beulah wailed at the top of her lungs through the service and Lischer's sermon. He concluded quickly by reminding the congregation that Buster had been a good Marine and father and now the church would assume the greater responsibility for his family.

And then the congregation moved to the little cemetery behind the church. The casket was lowered into the grave. Lischer said the words of committal and it was over — and the military phase was about to begin. Four uniformed veterans from the local VFW formed an armored guard and fired three times over the heads of the congregation. There was even a bugler for the occasion. 12 year-old Moriah Seamanns, standing halfway up the hill in a pink jumper with a thin white sweater draped over her shoulders. Her new coronet caught the sunlight and she was about to give the performance of her life. Her mother stood beside her to hold her music and to steady her child — like a _____in the silence of the spring afternoon.

Then Moriah began to play. She did not play "Taps." She played four stanzas of "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth" arching each note across the ravine toward the mourners on the hill…It was, Lischer says, "as if her music were a time-delayed message coming to us from a saner and more beautiful world.

Standing in the lumpy mud of the cemetery, Lischer said he "could see Easter."

The ordinary become holy.
Everyday experiences become sacred
at the unlikeliest of moments, the
Risen Christ appears

Thanks be to God.

Amen.